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Testimony

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Need for Study of U.S. International
Broadcasting Policy

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Before the
Subcommittee on International Operations,
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives



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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our views on the bill (H.R. 4013) to establish a bipartisan Presidential Commission to review, assess, and report on the programs, goals, and future direction of the Board for International Broadcasting and the United States Information Agency. Our comments relate to the international broadcasting activities associated with the Board and the Agency. We believe the establishment of an independent group like a commission to review the U.S. government international broadcasting policy is appropriate and timely. Changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, developments in South Africa and Central America, the tight federal budget, and the passage of time since the last comprehensive review of international broadcasting in the early 1980s point to a need for a reexamination of the missions and operations of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the Voice of America (VOA).

I would like to highlight the results of our prior reviews, which I believe serve as a good basis for setting forth the factors that should be considered in evaluating the future role of international broadcasting.

REVIEWS OF INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

Over the past 20 years, GAO has issued eight reports concerning a wide range of issues affecting the economy and efficiency of the operations of RFE/RL and VOA. Prior to June 1971, the Central Intelligence Agency provided oversight and funding for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Between 1971 and 1973, temporary oversight and funding were provided by the Department of State. During this transition, we reported in 1972 that if the Congress elected to continue funding the radios, consideration should be given to consolidating certain functions of the two organizations. In 1973, a Presidential Study Commission on International Radio Broadcasting, known as the Eisenhower Commission, endorsed our suggestions to consolidate activities. The Commission reviewed the operations of and funding for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty and recommended methods for future maintenance and support that would not impair their professional independence and effectiveness. The Commission's report led to Congress establishing the Board for International Broadcasting to oversee RFE/RL. The Board was formally constituted on April 30, 1974.

In the spring of 1976, we reported on the management of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. We recommended that the Board for International Broadcasting clarify its oversight role in the management of the radios. We further recommended that, to promote economy and efficiency, a single corporation be formed to

consolidate and streamline their operations and activities. Subsequently, the Board clarified how it would carry out its oversight responsibilities, and Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty moved to create a single corporation.

In 1981, we reported on additional means to improve the operations of RFE/RL, including strengthening policy assessment, program evaluation functions, and staff development. Also, we recommended to the Congress that the executive branch prepare a study to formulate plans for U.S. international broadcasting in the 1980s. The executive branch eventually acted on these recommendations.

In 1982, we reviewed the management of VOA and recommended specific actions to improve VOA's effectiveness, efficiency, and economy, including revisions to programming practices, the elimination of shortwave backup, and the establishment of a long-range plan for modernization of technical facilities. That same year, the National Security Council reviewed the U.S. international broadcasting system and set priorities for future programming of both RFE/RL and VOA. This set the framework for the long-range modernization plans for RFE/RL and VOA. To our knowledge, no comprehensive review of international broadcasting activities has been undertaken since the National Security Council's 1982 study.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN
COMMISSION STUDY

The mission of RFE/RL is to further the dissemination of information and ideas in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by operating as a surrogate "home" radio station. VOA, on the other hand, has the mission to serve as a global U.S. radio service. It is mandated by law to broadcast to the world accurate, objective, and comprehensive news; a balanced portrayal of American life, thought, and institutions; an effective presentation of U.S. policies; and a responsible discussion of U.S. policies. Both have a large commitment to broadcast to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. We estimate that VOA's operating cost to broadcast to the region is \$68 million, while RFE/RL's operating cost is \$173 million.

Worldwide, VOA broadcasts in 43 languages, including English. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, VOA broadcasts in 19 languages including English, while RFE/RL broadcasts in 23. In this region, VOA broadcasts 385 hours weekly, while RFE/RL broadcasts 430 hours of original material and 1,070 hours total airtime weekly. In some cases, they are broadcasting at the same time in the same language.

Both VOA and RFE/RL have extensive modernization programs underway to replace outdated equipment and increase their capability. VOA's modernization program, which began in the early 1980s at an estimated cost as high as \$1.5 billion, has been reduced to around

\$800 million to reflect budgetary constraints. One goal of VOA's program is to improve its ability to broadcast clear signals to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1985, RFE/RL began a \$77 million program to upgrade its technical facilities. In addition, both are involved in a joint project in Israel to build a radio relay station that will cost approximately \$290 million.

In our opinion, a review of U.S. involvement in international broadcasting must consider U.S. foreign policy and political interests; the missions of VOA and RFE/RL; and operational issues, including program and technical requirement funds. We believe that the need for the continued level of support should be reassessed in light of present conditions and U.S. foreign policy rather than the accomplishments under earlier conditions. More specifically, we believe that an assessment of RFE/RL and VOA should include the following questions:

- Is RFE/RL's mission as a surrogate "home" radio station still valid considering the current changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Additionally, should RFE/RL be given the mission of training Eastern Europeans and the Soviets on the role and operation of an independent news media?
- Is VOA's allocation of resources to various areas of the world appropriate, given the changes around the globe?

- Can the missions of RFE/RL and VOA be consolidated into a new organization that would eliminate duplicative functions, such as news collection, research, and personnel and administrative support, and reduce competition for listeners; or could these organizations share their technical facilities?

- Are there ways to achieve greater operational economies and efficiencies, such as (1) reducing the number of languages used, (2) limiting the number of hours of original and repeat programming, (3) increasing the technical interchangeability of facilities, and (4) establishing more uniform technical standards for broadcast?

We believe that, if the Commission is to come about through legislation, H.R. 4013 should probably be amended to provide for appointment of a chairperson, compensation or lack thereof of members and staff, and funding. Should the commission be one which contemplates holding hearings, using temporary or intermittent services of experts or consultants, or detailing federal employees from other agencies, the usual provisions covering those matters also should be added.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I will be happy to respond to any questions.

GAO REPORTS ISSUED ON INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING
1970-1990

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